




Frances Griffiths with fairy, photographed by Elsie Wright, 1920

"Ticing" the Fairies

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n 1917, the most terrible war humanity had ever endured was raging for its third year. It was called the Great War—or sometimes the World War, because so much of the world was fighting. In the same year, ten-year-old Frances Griffiths arrived in Cottingley, a village in Yorkshire, England. Frances had lived most of her life in South Africa. When her father joined the fighting, Frances went on an extended visit to relatives in Cottingley.

Frances and her sixteen-year-old cousin Elsie Wright began to spend long afternoons playing by the nearby "beck," a Yorkshire word for a creek or stream. To her delight, Frances saw many fairies there. She had never seen fairies back in South Africa. ("It must be too hot for them there," she wrote home to a friend.)

One afternoon in July while enticing the fairies—or "ticing" them, as she liked to say—Frances fell in the beck and got her clothes wet. She got a scolding from Polly and Arthur Wright, her aunt and uncle. Arthur, a no-nonsense fellow, was angered by Frances' insistence that the episode had been caused by fairies. Poor Frances was reduced to tears.

Elsie was very upset by her parents' unfairness toward her cousin. So she asked her father if she and Frances could borrow his camera for a while. Surely, she thought, her parents would be convinced by photographs of fairies.

Now, many skeptics will object to this version of how the Cottingley case began. They will insist that Frances and Elsie never saw fairies at all. But two girls seeing fairies in Yorkshire seems sanity itself when

compared to the madness running rampant elsewhere in the world at the time.

Arthur reluctantly lent Elsie his camera. It was called a "Midg," and it used glass plates instead of rolls of film. It was fairly crude, not known for getting sharp images. But Elsie and Frances took it eagerly to the beck that sunny, Saturday afternoon. A half hour later, they rushed excitedly back to the house, insisting that Arthur immediately develop the picture. Arthur went to his darkroom and set warily to work.

The image that appeared was far from clear—but then, Elsie had never taken a photograph before. In the center of the rectangular frame was Frances' face, slightly out of focus, staring dreamily (or was it boredly?) into the camera. Behind Frances to her right was a lovely waterfall. Her elbows were planted on a mossy mound, upon which were four small, vague white figures. Elsie and Frances said that these were dancing fairies.

Arthur didn't believe it, nor did his wife, Polly. But he lent the girls the camera again on another sunny day in August. They took it to the beck and returned as excited as before. This time, Frances had taken the photograph. It showed Elsie sitting on the grass, extending her hand to a twelve-inch tall winged figure. Frances and Elsie claimed the little creature was a gnome—a kind of dwarf familiar in fairy tales.

Arthur was sure that the girls were playing a joke—for they really did love a joke. Moreover, they were wasting expensive photographic plates, so he never lent them the Midg again. The girls weren't especially heartbroken. As for the two photographs, they passed them around to friends and relatives who didn't know what to make of them.

The Great War ended in November 1918. By then, Frances' father had returned safely from France. Instead of going back to South Africa, Frances and her family resettled in the English coastal city of Scarborough, not very far from Cottingley. So Frances was able to visit her cousin often, and the two continued to "tice" the fairies by the beck—not that anyone really cared. For awhile, it seemed as if the fairy photographs would be forgotten, even by the girls themselves.

But Frances and Elsie were not the only members of the family with a mystical turn of mind. Although Polly Wright didn't put much stock in the fairy photographs, she had strange experiences of her own, including astral projections (in which one's conscious self leaves one's body) and memories of past lives. Arthur, of course, had no sympathy for this kind of thing, but Polly found fellowship in the Theosophical Society.

This mystical organization, which still exists today, was very influential in England and America during the early years of the twentieth century. Theosophy combines the ideas of Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism with a belief in extraordinary phenomena, including clairvoyance (the ability to perceive objects outside one's field of vision) and mediumship (the ability to communicate with the spirits of the dead).

In 1919, Polly Wright attended a Theosophical Society meeting at which the lecture topic was fairies. Not surprisingly, Theosophical doctrine took a stand in favor of their existence. Was it possible, Polly now wondered, that Elsie and Frances really saw fairies by the beck—and that the photographs they had taken three years earlier were genuine?

Polly told the lecturer about the photographs, then later sent him prints. In the early months of 1920, the prints reached Edward Gardner, an influential Theosophist, who had them professionally sharpened. The figures in front of Frances were clearly fairies, three of them with wings. And the creature in the second photograph was unmistakably a gnome. (Of course, the airbrushed "sharpening" of the photographs proved quite controversial.)

Gardner sent prints of the pictures to his friend, the famous author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle is best known as the creator of the celebrated fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, a hard-headed rationalist who, in at least one story, declared his disbelief in the supernatural. But the author's ideas were not the same as those of his character, for Doyle was an outspoken proponent of Spiritualism. Like Theosophy, Spiritualism emphasized the supernatural, especially communications with the dead.

Theosophy and Spiritualism were only two of many such movements in the early twentieth century. Why was there so much interest in mysticism then? The nineteenth century had brought great intellectual and technological changes—including the coining of the word "scientist" in 1840. The secrets of electricity had been unlocked, and by the turn of the century public use of electrical power was widespread. Before the beginning of the World War, automobiles were also common, and powered flight was a reality.

Such developments were beneficial in many ways, but they also had a darker side, which became evident during the war. No sooner had humankind conquered the air than aviators began bombing cities. Terrible new weapons included tanks, machine guns, and poison gas. War began threatening even civilian populations in frightful new ways.

But most disturbingly to many people, religion seemed undermined by scientific discoveries. In 1859, Charles Darwin published *Origin of Species*, which argued that all living creatures—including human beings—evolved from a common ancestor. Darwin's theories seemed to make a creator deity completely unnecessary. People were stunned by Darwin's book. The age of scientific materialism was underway; could faith survive?

The Great War seemed an awful climax to a long spiritual crisis. Its carnage was blamed as much on scientific materialism as on runaway technology. Civilization itself appeared to have lost its spiritual bearings, and human life no longer had its once sacred value. It seems small wonder that so many people took refuge in mysticism.

Doyle was personally affected by the tragedy of the war. In 1918, his son Kingsley died as a result of injuries he had suffered at the Battle of Somme in 1916. Doyle did not have the comfort of religion to help him through this loss, for his faith had been shattered by reading Darwin. Even before Kingsley's death, Doyle had flirted with Spiritualism. Might it restore civilization's waning sense of the sacred—on a fully scientific basis?

Perhaps understandably, Doyle's grief for Kingsley made him a full convert to Spiritualism. In 1925, he even claimed to have heard Kingsley speak to him during a seance—a session in which a medium summons the spirits of the dead.

It makes sense, then, that Doyle was convinced by the photographs. He published them along with an article he wrote about fairies for the 1920 Christmas issue of *Strand Magazine*, the periodical in which most of the Sherlock Holmes stories first appeared. Doyle's article told how the photographs had been taken by two girls in Yorkshire—although, to protect their privacy, he renamed them "Alice" and "Iris."

With his Holmes-like eye, Doyle pointed out many striking details in the photographs. For example, the fairies in the first picture were playing pipes. And in the second picture, he saw a spot on the gnome's belly which he concluded was a navel. To Doyle, this proved that gnomes reproduced in much the same manner as human beings.

Doyle's article and the published photographs created a sensation. For many people, the photographs were undeniable proof of the existence of fairies, but others raised nagging questions. Why, for example, did some of the fairies sport contemporary clothes and hairstyles? Since when had fairies been fashion-conscious?



France
1917

Gardner and Doyle had no trouble with questions. The fairies, they believed, were made of a mysterious substance called ectoplasm which flowed from the girls' minds. While the fairies were certainly real, their shapes were influenced by the girls' concepts of fairies. And "Alice" and "Iris" would naturally visualize modern-looking fairies.

"Alice" and "Iris" did not remain anonymous for long. A reporter uncovered their identities and went to Yorkshire to interview the Wrights. To the family's dismay, more reporters followed. There was little hope that the fairy pictures would soon be forgotten.

To the contrary, Doyle and Gardner wanted more pictures, and even before the publication of the *Strand* article, Gardner went to Cottingley to get them. Since Arthur Wright had forbidden Elsie and Frances to use his Midg, Gardner took two cameras.

Gardner was undismayed when Frances and Elsie told him that he could not accompany them to the beck. After all, fairies were known to be shy, and they were unlikely to appear except in the presence of kindred spirits—especially children. (With typical Victorian chauvinism, Gardner seems to have regarded Elsie, then nineteen, as a child.) He left the cameras with the cousins, returned to London, and waited.

His wait was not in vain. During the spring of 1921, Elsie and Frances took three more pictures. The first showed a startled Frances with a fairy leaping before her nose. The second showed another airborne fairy offering flowers to Elsie. The last photograph was harder to make out, but Doyle said it showed sunbathing fairies awakening from a nap.

In 1921, Doyle published another *Strand* article featuring the new photographs. Like the first article, this one stirred up a storm of controversy. All England was caught up in fairy fever—except Frances and Elsie, for in 1921, they stopped seeing fairies altogether. Elsie was quite grown up by then, and although Frances was only fourteen, she was serious and scholarly and too mature for such childish interests.

Soon, Frances and Elsie quietly slipped out of the public eye—at least for a time. Both women married and became mothers and grandmothers. The fairies stopped playing any significant part in their lives. But for many other people, the fascination continued. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle lived until 1930, writing and lecturing about Spiritualism and the fairies until he died. He never questioned the photographs' authenticity.

Years passed, and the photographs were never forgotten. But little by little, doubters asked increasingly damaging questions. They pointed out that Elsie had always been a skillful artist and had done a short stint as a photographer's assistant. Might she have used her drawing skills and her knowledge of photography to fake the pictures?

Doubters also pointed out that the dancing fairies in the first photograph looked uncannily like an illustration in *Princess Mary's Gift Book*, published in 1915. (Ironically, Doyle never noticed this resemblance, despite the fact that a story of his own appeared in the same book.) It seemed likely that the first photograph was based on this illustration.

Eventually, reporters sought out the cousins again. In 1981, eighty-year-old Elsie finally confessed, and in 1982 Frances followed suit. The fairies, they explained, were simply drawings cut out of poster board. Elsie had, indeed, traced the fairies in the first photograph from *Princess Mary's Gift Book*.

The cutouts had been propped or perched on hat pins. The fairies and the gnome in the first two photographs were stuck in the ground and photographed with Frances and Elsie. What Doyle had thought was the gnome's navel was really just a hat pin. The flying fairies in the third and fourth photographs had been pinned to tree branches.

And so the case of the Cottingley fairies was closed. But oddly enough, the fairies became more popular than ever. People have been talking and

writing about them incessantly ever since. And in 1997, two films inspired by the Cottingley fairies appeared—*Fairy Tale: A True Story* and *Photographing Fairies*.

So the mystery of the Cottingley fairies still fascinates, perhaps because unanswered questions lurk just beneath the story's surface. Even in their old age, Frances and Elsie insisted that they really saw fairies as children. So in just what sense were the photographs faked? Isn't it possible, at the start, that Elsie truly wanted to depict what she and her cousin thought they had seen? No doubt, a prankish desire to puncture adult self-certainty played an important role. But was it really full-blown fraud at the beginning?

Of course, Elsie and Frances both admitted to a hoax, but when did it really *become* a hoax? Was it when they took that first picture—or the second, third, fourth, or fifth? Or was it only when they remembered the episode in the self-certainty of their own adulthood?

Debunkers will insist that such questions are beside the point, but debunkers didn't fare well in the Cottingley case. In 1920, experts at Kodak suspected the work of a professional photographer. Around the same time, psychical researcher Sir Oliver Lodge suggested that the first picture was staged with dancers. And during the 1970s, the famous debunker James "The Amazing" Randi analyzed the photographs and thought he saw *strings* holding up the fairies. Even debunkers sometimes imagine things.

The last photograph—the one that Doyle thought showed fairies awakening from a nap—remains puzzling. Elsie eventually claimed that it was also a fake, and that she took it herself. But Frances always insisted that it was the only authentic photograph of the five—and that *she* took it herself! Why the conflicting stories?

Photographic experts believe that the last picture is the only double exposure of the five. In all likelihood, Elsie took one exposure of cutout fairies on the grass. Then, not knowing that her cousin had already exposed the negative, Frances snapped another shot, accidentally creating a mysterious image. But why did Frances insist that this one photograph was genuine even after admitting that the others were faked? And what did she think she was photographing when she snapped that extra exposure?

So many questions, about a "solved" mystery! Small mysteries disappear once they've been solved, while great mysteries only grow deeper. It seems a safe bet that the Cottingley fairies will continue as a really great mystery. ∞